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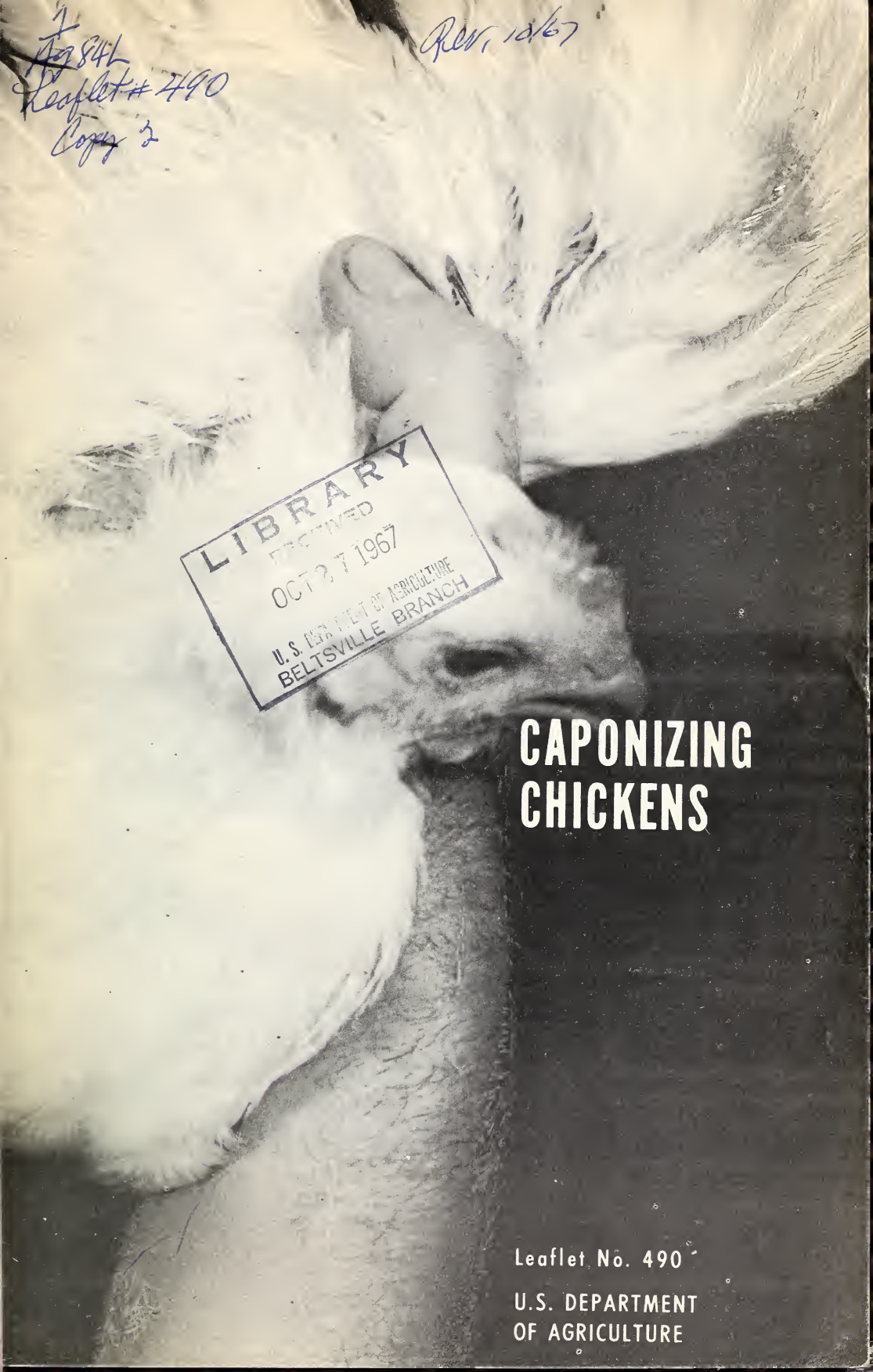

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CAPONIZING CHICKENS

Leaflet No. 490

U.S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

Caponizing Chickens

Male chickens are caponized, or castrated, to make them fatten more readily. Because of their superior meat qualities, capons bring a better price per pound.

Before deciding to caponize cockerels for sale, study the demand for capons and the prices paid. Compare the local market with other markets. Caponizing cockerels only during particular seasons and fattening them for special holiday markets may be more profitable than caponizing throughout the hatching season.

EFFECTS OF CAPONIZING

Up to 4 or 5 months of age, capons and cockerels weigh about the same; afterward, capons gain weight more rapidly than cockerels.

At the age when cockerels show pronounced spur and comb development and are called stags, their flesh begins to toughen. Toughness of flesh does not occur in capons.

After cockerels are a year old, they are classed as old cocks and bring very low prices. Capon flesh will still be tender if birds are kept beyond the age when they reach the

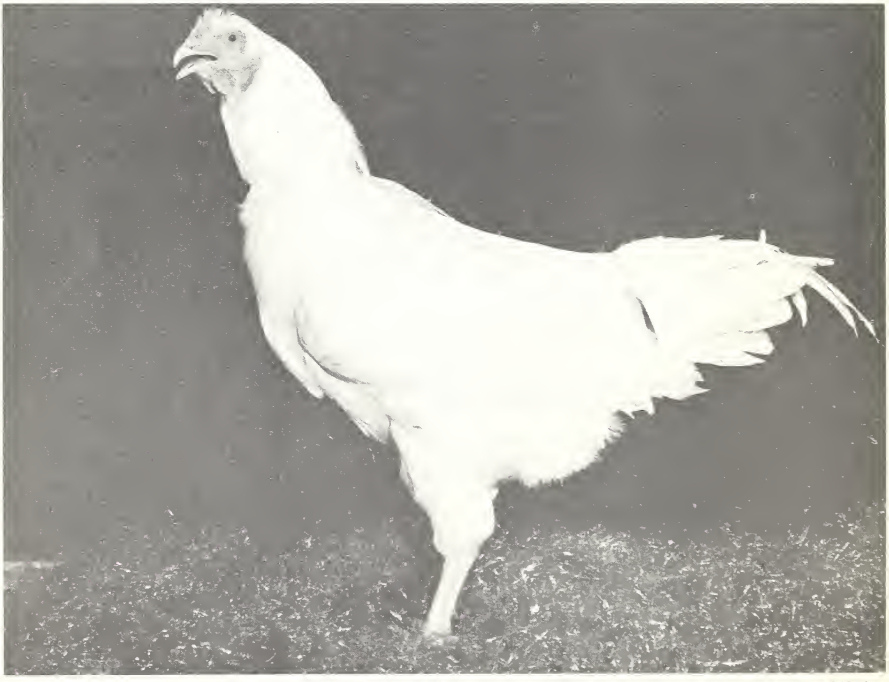

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Figure 1.—This capon is 9 months old. He completed his growth at 6 months.

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Figure 2.—Cockerels sufficiently developed for caponizing.

usual market weight of 7 to 8 pounds (fig. 1).

A capon differs from a cockerel in temperament and appearance:

- It is quiet and docile, lacking a cockerel's disposition to fight; it seldom crows.
- Because the comb and wattles cease growing, the head looks small. The hackle, tail, and saddle feathers grow unusually long.

SELECTING A BREED

Broiler stocks with white plumage and yellow skin are preferred. White Plymouth Rocks, New Hampshires, Rhode Island Reds, and crosses of these breeds, or those involving dominant White Cornish are generally used. Larger capons bring the best prices. Caponizing small fowls such as Leghorns does not pay.

TIME TO CAPONIZE

Capons are in greatest demand at Thanksgiving and Christmas. However, there is a growing demand for capons during other holiday seasons, especially the Jewish holidays in September. Because capons take 5 to 6 months to grow and finish properly, the best time to caponize for these markets varies from spring to early fall.

Most poultrymen caponize when cockerels are 3 to 5 weeks old (fig. 2). Some producers specialize in selling 4- to 6-week-old birds that were caponized at 10 days. Although cockerels over 2 months old may be caponized, the operation is not worthwhile.

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Figure 3.—A bird correctly restrained for caponizing.

THE OPERATION

Withhold feed and water approximately 24 hours before the operation. The bird's intestines should be almost empty. Keep the birds in a wire- or slat-bottom coop.

Good light is necessary when you operate. Direct sunlight is best; a strong electric light, with a reflector, may be used indoors.

You can use a barrel or box as an operating table. If you caponize a large number of birds, use a table of a convenient height.

You will need two cords about 2 feet long and two 1-pound weights. Fasten one end of each cord to a weight.

Figure 4.—The dotted line shows the correct place for the incision.

Restraint

Tie the cockerel's legs securely with one of the cords, using a half hitch (fig. 3). Tie both wings together near the shoulder joint with a half hitch in the other cord. Hang the weights over the edges of the operating table to keep the bird stretched out.

Arrange the cords so that they are easy to adjust and the bird can easily be turned over without removing the weights.

You can have an assistant hold the birds for the operation instead of using weights. However, the weight method is recommended for the amateur.

Methods

Most inexperienced operators find it easier to remove the upper (or nearer) testicle through one incision and the other testicle through a second incision on the other side of the body.

If you decide to remove both testicles through the same incision, remove the lower one first. Bleeding from the upper may obscure the lower.

No matter which way you choose, you must be careful not to rupture the spermatic artery. It is located just behind each testicle. If this artery is ruptured, the chicken will bleed to death. Usually, if feed and water have been withheld, the spermatic artery presents no problem.

You need these instruments: Knife, rib spreader, sharp-pointed hook and forceps. Caponizing instruments may be bought separately or as complete sets. Complete the operation as quickly as possible.

Moisten and remove the feathers from a small area over the last two ribs, just in front of the thigh (fig. 4). With one hand slide the skin and flesh down toward the thigh (fig. 5). Hold it there.

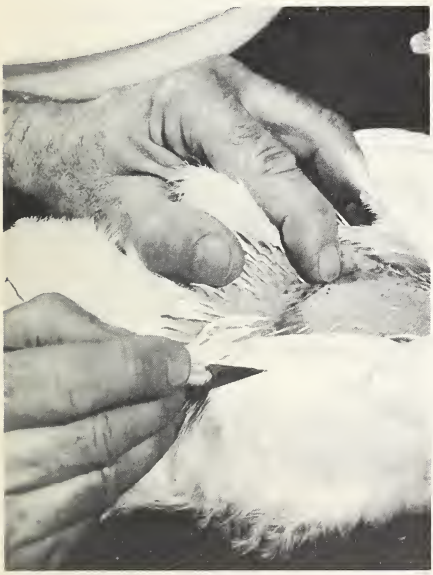

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Figure 5.—Slide the skin and flesh down toward the thigh and hold it there.

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Figure 6.—Make the first cut between the last two ribs.

Make the first cut between the last two ribs (fig. 6). Lengthen the incision in each direction until it is ¾ to 1 inch long (fig. 7).

Now insert the spreader into the incision to spring the ribs apart (fig. 8). The intestines will be visible beneath a thin membrane. Tear open this membrane with the hook. This will expose the upper testicle. It is yellow or sometimes dark colored and about the size and shape of a navy bean. It is close to the backbone.

By pushing the intestines aside, you can see the lower testicle. It is in a similar position to the upper one, but on the other side of the backbone.

With the forceps, grasp the testicle, but not the artery. *Remove the lower testicle first if the one-incision method is used.* Be sure to grasp the entire testicle. Slowly twist and tear the testicle away from the spermatic cord to which it is attached (fig. 9).

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Figure 7.—Lengthen the incision until it is ¾ to 1 inch long.

If the two-incision method is used, turn the bird over and perform a similar operation on the other side.

No sewing of an incision is necessary, since the thigh muscles act as a strong bandage to cover the incision (fig. 10).

SLIPS

Many times, particularly when beginners perform it, the operation seems to be entirely satisfactory, but the bird will become what is known as a "slip." A "slip" is neither cockrel nor capon.

This condition results when a small piece of testicle is left in the body. The piece often grows to a considerable size. Because "slips" have the same aggressive disposition as cockrels, they fatten little or no better than a cockrel and often bring about the same price.

An additional reason for eliminating "slips" from the flock is the management problem that they present. With their aggressive disposition, they are able to force the capons away from feed and water and cause unnecessary disturbances in the flock.

When beginners perform the operation, as many as half of the birds may become "slips."

LOSSES IN CAPONIZING

Even experts kill some birds in caponizing. The loss is small, seldom exceeding 2 to 3 percent where large numbers are caponized and usually not more than 1 percent. With beginners, of course, the percentage of birds killed is much larger. However, with a little practice and care, the loss is soon reduced.

Practice is required to become expert enough to operate rapidly. Where large numbers of capons are grown, experts are hired. Some experts can caponize a bird in less than a minute. However, the time varies depending on the experience of the operator and the efficiency of his assisting crew. Expert caponizers charge 8 to 12 cents a bird.

If you are a beginner, practice at first on slaughtered birds to acquire skill before attempting to caponize a live bird.

CARE OF CAPONIZED BIRDS

After the operation, keep capons away from other chickens for 2 or 3 days. Most growers give capons ordinary growing or broiler mash with some grain and put them on range immediately without any special handling.

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Figure 8.—Spread the ribs apart and open the membrane covering the intestines.

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Figure 9.—Twist and slowly tear the testicle away from the cords to which it is attached.

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Figure 10.—No sewing of the incision is necessary. The thigh muscles (arrow) act as a bandage.

Air puffs may develop on some capons within a week or 10 days after the operation. Air puffs are harmless and are caused by air gathered under the skin. You can release this air by pricking the skin with a needle or knife and pressing out the air. Within 10 days after the operation, the incision usually heals completely.

Breast blisters often form on the keels of capons. They are likely to start when capons are about half grown and may increase as they become heavier. Birds may develop breast blisters from roosts that are too narrow or from resting on board, concrete, or wire floors. Floors should be covered with soft, loose, dry litter if the birds do not roost.

Prepared by Animal Husbandry Research Division, Agricultural Research Service in cooperation with George D. Quigley, Institute of Applied Agriculture, University of Maryland

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